‘WE KNOW YOUR MOB NOW’

Histories and their cultures

CHRIS HEALY

Which of our traditions we want to carry on and which we do not is decided in the public process of transmitting a culture. The less we are able to rely on a triumphal national history, on the seamless normality of what has come to prevail, and the more clearly we are conscious of the ambivalence of every tradition, the more intense are the disputes about this process of cultural transmission.¹

For a long time Aboriginal history was an impossibility. History was both the product and the self-contemplation of European civilization. Aborigines were allowed to have myths, for myth is one of the great markers of the primitive, but history they had not. True knowledge of the past was knowledge of white Australia and reserved for white Australians.

Today there is such a thing as Aboriginal history; histories by and about Aboriginal people are now widely read and receiving literary recognition. These histories are part of a diverse cultural movement that is remaking black Australia. They might also become a resource for remaking the culture of the colonizers. W. E. H. Stanner’s ‘Great White Australian Silence’ was always a double silence: a refusal to speak and a refusal to hear. If some are now hearing Aboriginal history, then perhaps European Australians can also speak differently about their own history; not just about events but about how they understand the past. My question is: what happens to the European history of Captain Cook if we read Aboriginal histories of Captain Cook? It’s a good place to start because, as Galarrwuy Yunupingu explained on Invasion Day 1988 when the Territory Mob went to Cook’s landing place at Kurnell rather than to Sydney Harbour, ‘You cannot begin a story halfway through. You begin a story at the beginning.’

In January 1853 Sir George Grey, then Governor of New Zealand, passed on to London a despatch from one of his officers. The despatch contained two accounts of Captain Cook’s visit to Purangi in 1769, one
a statement by a Maori chief named Taniwha who remembered the event, the other an extract from Cook's journals. The two versions of the event are printed side-by-side so a reader can compare the texts. They co-exist as literary records. Governor Grey is excited by the oral history because it confirms existing European accounts. He writes:

It will be found that the statement made by this old chief, of his remembrance of an event which took place so long ago, entirely accords with the account given in the narrative of Captain Cook's voyages.  

Grey does not describe Cook's journals as documents or true history but as 'narrative', which he sets alongside Taniwha's 'remembrance', which amazes him with its longevity. He seems to grant each its own integrity and its own truth value.

Over a hundred years later, there is another European evaluation of indigenous peoples' history in Ken Maddock's Past and Present. The Construction of Aboriginality. Here Maddock examines six Aboriginal 'myths' of Captain Cook and makes what he calls observations on their historical value. He describes one Aboriginal narrative of Cook as a 'charming tale', another as 'completely anachronistic'. He writes that to believe in these Aboriginal histories would result in 'some totally erroneous pages of history'. We are encouraged to regard these stories as about 'themes and symbols' because 'Judged as history, the myths are inexcusably cavalier.' Maddock's faith in the epistemology of European history is such that he can 'prove' it is more accurate and more truthful, that it produces superior knowledge.

Governor Grey and Ken Maddock are both, in their own ways, discussing the old problem of myth and history. Each compares the history of the indigenous 'other' around the shared body of white understanding of Cook. To contrast Grey and Maddock in this way, however, is a little ingenuous. Grey has a scholarly interest in Maori language and culture; he is collecting material for his Polynesian Mythology. His interest is also instrumental: in the midst of the Maori uprisings he 'could not negotiate critical issues of war and peace with the Maori chiefs unless he had a sound knowledge of their poetry and mythology'. A Maori and a European history only appear together because the two versions concur. By contrast, Maddock is grappling with the differences between indigenous and European histories. In the end his professional protocols require that Aboriginal narratives be dismissed as less than proper history because they do not concur with the 'primary sources'. Then again, Grey and Maddock are similar in that they are assaying the truths of historical belief systems, testing, comparing and translating. Both presume the prerogative to judge. But how are they listening to these histories?

Once I explained to Wainburranga the non-Aboriginal account of Captain Cook. When Wainburranga relayed this account to people
back at Beswick, it was greeted with some hilarity. How did white people know about Captain Cook? Only through books, of course: books are notoriously changeable.  

Listening can never be passive; it always involves a moment of appropriation. The tourist industry has its routine firmly in place:

‘Tell us what you are really like,’ say the white institutions, ‘Dance for us once more and sing your songs. We will say to the world that this too is our Australian heritage: this is the nation which can stand proud amongst others because it has a timeless history in the Aboriginal peoples.’  

Alternatively, non-Aboriginal people can translate Aboriginal history into the idiom, structures and narratives of European historiography. This leaves European ways of understanding history intact, because it presumes the forms, rights and universality of white knowledge.  

But there is another option: to accept that there might be basic distinctions between an Aboriginal historical sensibility and a non-Aboriginal historical sensibility, a primary fissure in the collective memory of this continent. Read in this way, these Aboriginal narratives of Cook have the capacity to ‘multiply our conceptions of history by the diversity of structures. Suddenly, there are all kinds of new things to consider.’

_Captain Cook, Related by Percy Mumbulla, Ulladulla_

Tunggee, that was her native name.  
She was a terrible tall woman  
who lived at Ulladulla  
She had six husbands  
an’ buried the lot.  

She was over a hundred, easy,  
when she died.  
She was tellin’ my father  
They were sittin’ on the point  
that was all wild scrub.  

The big ship came and anchored  
out at Snapper Island  
He put down a boat  
an rowed up the river  
into Batemans Bay.  

He landed on the shore of the river  
the other side from where the church is now  
When he landed he gave the Kurris clothes  
an’ those big sea biscuits.  
Terrible hard biscuits they was.
When they were pullin’ away to go back
to the ship, these wild Kurris
were runnin’ out of the scrub.
They stripped right off again
They were throwin’ the clothes an’ biscuits
back at Captain Cook
as his men were pullin’ away in the boat.  

Mumbulla’s history of Cook has not been transcribed from lengthy oral
transcripts. We can read the influence of the non-Aboriginal ‘collec-
tor’, Roland Robinson, in the imposition of verse form. Despite its
origins and the problems of interpretation that this presents, Paddy
Mumbula’s very concise rendering of ‘Captain Cook’ articulates many
characteristics of Aboriginal histories of Cook.

This printed text is the product of an oral culture and exchange in
oral history. So we do not read the evidential systems that written
European history has used since it began borrowing citation methods
from jurists and priests in the sixteenth century. This history is born as
tradition, not built up from source materials; Percy Mumbulla himself
is source, document and validation. The proof of the story, its regime
of truth, is very precisely in its telling, its performance and its lineage.
Strictly speaking, the history has no ‘originality’ and no author, but a
line of guardians or custodians of historical memory. Percy Mumbulla
is preceded by his father who is preceded by Tungee, all of whom
ensure that the story is both truly remembered and true because it is
remembered.

Like most Aboriginal histories of Cook, the history is linked to place
rather than time. Whereas Europeans are in the habit of ordering
events in time, Aboriginal history is equally precise in ordering names
to places. This convention is crucial in terms of codifying, position-
ning and orienting the dialogue. In this case, not only do we hear history
through place, but the place of the history establishes its authority
because place and its meaning is continuous. In the terms of a non-
Aboriginal sense of history, it is not really clear whether the ‘historic’
event was observed from the point or whether the history is told from
there. For Aboriginal historical consciousness this is a distinction. The
time of the ‘event’ returns with the time of the telling because the place
is always there. These are histories without a linear notion of time,
histories in which space is deeply historical.

In most of these histories, including the accounts of non-coastal
people, Cook comes from the sea. Land and sea are important cultural
signs. Cook must come from the sea because he is a disruption to
normal order and normal life. By definition a disruption cannot come
from the land, because all the relationships of the universe are
guaranteed in the land and through the Law. The land is the source of
all order. This means that the initial contact takes place on the beaches,
those ‘dangerous and ambivalent places of beginnings and endings’ that provided Greg Dening with a metaphor for another part of the Pacific. In Percy Mumbulla’s ‘Captain Cook’, as in many of the other histories, the beach is a place of exchange; sometimes an exchange of useful goods, axes or cloth, or of food that is memorable for its strangeness, or an exchange of information. But the exchanges are an ominous sign, whatever their material substance, because they are initiated by Cook and yet Cook is always outside of culture. He cannot make a valid exchange, but only one riddled with confusion or transgression.

In European history the distribution of trinkets on the beach is the classic demonstration of an explorer’s good intentions and kindness, but the response is often unexpected. As another Captain Cook discovered, ‘they seem’d to set no Value upon any thing we gave them’. Aboriginal histories of Cook make it clear that exchange was impossible because a shared framework was absent. Cook appears either as transgressing basic moral principles or as a bearer of immanent structural inequality. In Mumbulla’s ‘Captain Cook’ the exchange is explicitly rejected because the goods themselves are without value; the sea biscuits are ‘terrible hard’. The goods are also rejected by ‘wild Kurris’ who come from the scrub refusing the garb of civility and consigning the invaders to the sea. Cook comes from the sea as a figure without culture.

Another history comes from Hobbles Danaiyairi of the Yarralin people in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory. A full version of this dialogue is to be the core of an Aboriginal history of the region being compiled by Danaiyairi, Deborah Rose and Darrell Lewis. Danaiyairi is described as one of the main bosses of a ceremony line relating to young men’s initiation and a man whose ‘words carry a degree of weight which is accorded to very few people in the region’. Danaiyairi is a fluent speaker of five languages. This version comes from Aboriginal English.

The Saga of Captain Cook

Right. Well I’m speaking today. I’m named Hobbles Danaiyairi. And I got some troubling. Long way back, beginning, I think, right back beginning. When him been start, that Captain Cook, still thinking about to get more land. From London and Big England, that’s his country . . . And when that Captain Cook been come through down to Sydney Harbour . . . And lotta people, lotta women, lotta children, they’re owning that city . . . And he don’t askem, that man. Too frightened . . . He don’t say, ‘good day’. No. He say to him, ask him, ‘This your country?’ ‘Yeah this my country’. . . And he putem out those people, takem out them guns, and bullocks, and man. Captain Cook been shooting . . . all the people . . . That means Captain Cook
getting ready for the country, going to try to take it away . . . Three weeks’ time and pack up his gear and put it in the sailing boat and keep going right round, follow the sea. Every pocket him go in and have a look around on another people. Same thing. Shooting right round . . . When him got to Darwin, that’s the biggest place . . . And Captain Cook come up, see that old fellow sit down makembad [make] spear there, hunting fish. And he don’t ask him. Same thing. Ask him one bit of the story: ‘By Christ, that’s good land here. Your country, it’s a big one? Many people round here?’ ‘Oh, lotta people round here. We big mob here,’ he said . . . ‘This we country. We never look whitefellow come through here . . . We can be ready for you. Got a big mob spear. We don’t want whitefellow.’ . . . ‘Get ready for this, old fellow. We might start here.’ [He] Start to put the bullet in the magazine, start to shoot people, same like Sydney . . . ‘Really beautiful country,’ Captain Cook reckoned. ‘That’s why I’m cleaning up the people, take it away.’

Alright. When him start to building Sydney Harbour, that means he get all the books from London, Big England. Bring a lot of man coming back again . . . Captain Cook sendem over here shooting lotta people . . . That’s why these Aboriginal people make an army . . . We been ready for whitefellows all right . . . And they been really, really cranky [angry], my people. Hitem with spear, killem . . . Because they been have a spear and whitefellow been have a rifle. That been beat him . . .

Right. And my people been start to work around . . . Anybody sick, anybody sick in the guts or in the head, Captain Cook orders: Don’t give him medicine. When they getting crook, old people, you killem first. When they on the job, that’s right, you can have them on the job. But don’t payem him. Let him work for free . . .

You Captain Cook, you kill my people. And right up to Gurinji now we remember . . . Why didn’t you look after London and Big England. You bring that Law . . . Same book . . . And he still got it today. My Law only one. Your law keep changing. You been coverem up me gotem big swag [concealing from the people the truth]. We remember. We thinking. Because we got all the culture. We know your mob now. You’ll have to agree with us, agree with people on the land. You gonna agree because Aboriginal owning.

At a very simple level, this might appear to a European historical sensibility as realist; just change a bit of the language and here is a very solid account of ‘the other side of the frontier’. It begins with Europeans going into the Victoria River District in the 1880s and at first trying to kill as many Aboriginal people as possible in open grasslands to establish a base of operations. Europeans continue to kill Aborigines as they present a threat, especially when they adopt a guerrilla campaign in the sandstone country. At the same time young
men and women are captured and put to work on the stations. The
confinement lasts until dependency is secured. Aboriginal people are
paid no wages and only valued employees are provided with minimal
food, shelter and medical treatment. Despite these regimes, as
Deborah Rose notes, secular and sacred knowledge is not extinguished
but refurbished through the wet season when work comes to a
halt. (26-7)

Behind its realist appearance, the text has other dimensions. Rose
has discussed the Saga in terms of the opposition between the moral
Yarralin Law and immoral law of Captain Cook. The special place
given to Cook provides a clue to the system of history that the Saga
proposes. The narrative is set in historical rather than dreaming time.
We know this because the relations of the cosmos are established and
Cook disrupts the order of things when he brings ‘some troubling’. As
Rose writes, ‘The Saga defines the temporal limits of this immoral law
(ordinary time) and asserts that the law must come to an end’. (39)
What follows can be read as the history of a problem; how can Captain
Cook’s Law, the Books from London, have power when it is immoral?
The Saga systematically sets out the dimensions of the immorality and
the consciousness of the actors. Cook and his minions act knowingly
and repetitively to exercise authority by force because they cannot
morally enforce an immoral law. (36-7)

This is an anti-humanist history. The major white protagonist is not
the ‘character’ or person that Europeans recognize as Cook. It is
immaterial whether James Cook visited the Northern Territory; he did
not come close to Melbourne, but he now gazes out over St Kilda Pier.
Cook is an archetype, he is the embodiment of structural principles
that provide the Yarralin with a means of elaborating the long-term
relations of force and constituting this historical process as the prob-
lem. This must be the case because the history preserves the memory of
immorality while maintaining its absolute foreignness to normal social
relations; it is a history of difference, different peoples and different
kinds of laws. The history is communicated to non-Aboriginal people
on the supposition that some at least are not under the sway of Captain
Cook’s Law and will recognize the truths in this historical sensibility
and the moral issues involved. Aboriginal remembrance in this history
is an antidote for white amnesia; ‘a powerful assertion that the
knowledge which Captain Cook’s law tried so hard to destroy is neither
dead nor forgotten’. (37)

The last of the three histories comes from Paddy Wainburranga of
the Rembarrnga people in central Arnhem Land. This version is edited
from a printed account and a film script, translated from Rembarrnga
and Kriol. 13

Paddy Wainburranga’s Story

Captain Cook. This is his song. The whole story. The way we know
from the Rembarrnga side.
It was the early days. From a long time ago. My grandfather hadn’t been born. My grandfather’s grandfather hadn’t been born. It tells about everything that has come from Captain Cook.

Captain Cook was really a business man [involved with law and ceremony]. People know he had white man’s power, white man’s things. Blackfellas never had those things, never had any of those things. Axes, steel knives; all came from Captain Cook. He came to the Good Law. He didn’t interfere and make a war. Captain Cook came from Mosquito Island, which is east of New Guinea. He came with his two wives, a donkey and a nanny goat. He was a really hard man, he had a hard job to do when he came to Sydney Harbour. He was never looking for trouble. He had his business building his barrupa – his boat – and his kayang-kayang – his paddles.

From the earliest days Satan lived there too. We call Satan ngayang. He lived on the other side of the harbour, Wanabal.

Captain Cook worked by himself on his boat. He was making the boat for himself, no-one else. Every day he would work on his boat by the salt water. He would come back home to have his dinner after working on his boat, then he would go to sleep.

But he didn’t know that the ngayang was always sneaking up behind his back while he was working. The Devil had been talking to his wives. ‘What does Captain Cook work for?’ the devil asked. The wives said: ‘He works for himself.’ One time Satan came behind his back to the wives and said, ‘Captain Cook. I’m going to kill him.’

When Captain Cook came back to eat his supper, he didn’t know. And then ngayang came out with his bone. Captain Cook said, ‘I know you. You’re Satan behind my back. I’ll turn around and look at you Satan.’

Satan said, ‘I’ll fight you and kill you and take your two wives.’ ‘All right. We’ll fight,’ said Captain Cook.

So they fought. At first Satan was winning. But then Captain Cook grabbed the devil by the throat, he pressed hard until he broke the ngang’s neck bone with his elbow. He was dead. Captain Cook then grabbed the devil and chucked him in the ground – into a hole – as punishment. And motor cars go through there now. After the fight Captain Cook went back to his own country, to Mosquito Island. We don’t know what happened there. Maybe all his family were jealous. But they attacked him with a spear. His own tribe did it – his relations.

Captain Cook came back to Sydney Harbour then he died from the spear wounds. And then he was buried in Sydney Harbour. Underneath. On the island.

I’ve finished with the story of old Captain Cook. I’m talking now about all the new Captain Cooks. When the old Captain Cook died, other people started thinking they could make Captain Cook another way. New people. Maybe all his sons. They started shooting people then. New Captain Cook people. They were the ones who have been
stealing all the women and killing people. They have made war. Warmakers, those New Captain Cooks. They all fought the wars. The new ones. Mr. White, Bill Harney, Mr. Sweeney, not old Captain Cook. He's dead. He didn't interfere and make war.

And then they made a new thing called 'welfare'. All the Captain Cook mob came and called themselves 'welfare mob'. They were new people now. They wanted to take all Australia. They wanted the whole of the country. All the new people wanted anything they could get. They could marry black women or white women. They could shoot people. New Captain Cook mob.

But now we've got our culture back.

That's all. That's the story now.

Here we have two Captain Cooks, or more accurately one Captain Cook and too many Captain Cooks. Deborah Rose thought that it was imperative for the Captain Cook of the Yarakin people to remain in historical time because in that way the immutable Dreaming Law maintains its strength in opposition to Captain Cook's law, which is a historical aberration of ordinary time; as Danaiyairi states, 'that time for Captain Cook, that was gone'.

In other words, he predicts the demise of Captain Cook's law because its time is only transient. But here we have an ingenious solution from Wainburraga. Cook has certainly crossed the 'floating gap' between historical time and dreaming time, but he has been transformed in the process. Captain Cook provides things for Aboriginal people, he has his own business, which is relatively autonomous, and he respects the law. In a confrontation with the devil, an aspect of himself described by Wainburraga as 'temptation', he struggles and triumphs.

Then comes the fall, in which, echoing the Christian narrative, women play the role of temptresses; the Europeans are transformed into victims. The new Captain Cooks kill the father, they breach the law, and as a consequence they lose what the father had, a place in the order of things, a place in the law. As Paddy Wainburraga put it on another occasion, the new Captain Cooks 'didn't care and they don't know. We the Rembarrnga respect only one Captain Cook', and so their fate is sealed.

We moderns no longer believe in the cycle but in evolution. For a long time humanity was a youngster; now it has grown up and does not tell itself any more myths. It has left behind or is about to emerge from its prehistory . . . In our eyes myth has ceased to tell the truth . . . Truth itself egocentrically remains our own. 15

The white invasion of this continent can be written as the story of Aboriginal people being made subjects by twin forces of domination and documentation. Domination is primarily driven by the imposition of the apparatus of a European state and acted out in the physical control of bodies and social life. The other force, documentation,
possessing indigenous people by ‘knowing’ them, has been the means by which European knowledge was reproduced, depositing its residue in museums, archives, libraries and the mentality of racism. This is the past and the present in the present,\textsuperscript{16} especially while those like Hugh Morgan believe that ‘history is what the settlers did to and for the Aborigines’.\textsuperscript{17}

Genuine cultural dialogues between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country remain difficult because knowledge and domination are so closely intertwined. A range of options is open to non-Aboriginals – from crude racism through the fascination of a tourist’s gaze to the naïve appropriation of ‘Aboriginal’ philosophies by ‘New Age’ spiritualism, to the very canny appropriation by the art market, or the sophisticated theoretical dismissal of race as a category of cultural essentialism. Aboriginal histories of Cook provide an opportunity to write reflectively about the systems of European history, instead of relentlessly dissecting the pathology of ‘the other’. These histories provide a powerful sense of the limits to a non-Aboriginal historical consciousness.

This is not to say we must abandon the entire tradition of Western thought about history. But equally we do not have to assume that the imagination of European modernity is the only valid way of understanding the past. European fictions of Cook have their own history: two major elements of the ruling fiction are condensed in the sub-heading from a very popular book published during the bicentennial: ‘Captain Cook discovers Australia and claims possession’. This incorporates the spatial dimension of the fiction: the act of ‘discovery’ follows a coast-hugging line, traced west from New Zealand to Point Hicks and then north. Then there is the act of ‘possession’, a \textit{commedia dell’arte} performance that only later comes to be recognized as conferring legal authority, founding a nation or inaugurating history on a ‘silent continent’. The historical sensibility of white Australia is no accident, but a product of our culture; it is quantitative, populist, universalist and materialist. It has its virtues and pleasures, but it also has an inbuilt imperialism that is wont to damn all alternatives as inferior.

For historicists, Aboriginal histories of Cook are just the ‘bits and pieces’ that remain as testimony to the tenacity of tradition and the reach of memory. Such scholars would be interested in sifting the rational kernel from the chaff, paring the histories down to an acceptable, assimilable, realist form.\textsuperscript{18} At one level this is obvious; even the most empirical of scientists get excited when carbon dating corroborates the collective memory of Aboriginal people over a span of 10,000 years.\textsuperscript{19} More importantly, the Aboriginal histories are about the constant process of remaking constitutive imagination within cultures. They share with European history a realist touchstone, in that they seek to conceptualize the past by making it textual. Aboriginal historians take Cook quite seriously and show interpretative respect for
the European injunction that 'Captain Cook discovered Australia'. These histories, like all others, take the human experience of time as their ultimate reference point.

History is never an imitation of 'the historical process', no matter how hard it tries to represent itself as such. Writing or reading the history of the Eureka Stockade is different from being at the Eureka Stockade, and generates different products. History always depends on appropriating the past in the present, providing a form and a plot. White history's conventions for writing Aboriginal experience tend towards the tragic or the romantic. Aboriginal histories of Cook reflect and condense the experiential appropriation of the history of conquest and survival. In these histories we have a whole range of alternative forms and plots that handle time/space differently, experiment with identity, juggle continuity and discontinuity and base their structures, not in progress or heroism, but in morality, culture, land and Law.

Aboriginal histories of Cook interpret the past through analogies and structural correspondences with the hopes and tribulations of the present. These histories refuse to make categorical distinctions between the past and the present. They explicitly speak of the symbolic past of history and acknowledge that its audience is always in the present. In other words, they produce histories not only to speak the past but histories for future action. Historical knowledge and its regimes of truth are important because they define who is able to say about whom and with what consequences. They can be very comforting for those in power, until the natives talk back.

**NOTES**

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2. Further Papers Relative to the Affairs of New Zealand, Presented to Both Houses of Parliament 10 April 1854.
3. Further discussion of these questions in a New Zealand context can be found in Judith Binney, 'Maori Oral Narratives, Pakeha Written Texts: Two Forms of Telling History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 21, 1, April 1987, pp. 14–28.

An outline of some of these questions is in Stephen Muecke, Alan Rumsey and Banjo Wirrunmarra, ‘Pigeon the Outlaw: History as Texts’, Aboriginal History, 9, 1, 1985, pp. 81–100.

Sahlins, op. cit., p. 72.


D. B. Rose, ‘The Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law’, Australian Aboriginal Studies, 2, pp. 24–39 – contains both the Saga by Hobbles Danayairi and the subtle and lucid analysis by D. B. Rose on which I have relied heavily in my comments here.

Chips Mackinolty and Paddy Wainburra, op. cit., and Penny Mac-Donald, Too Many Captain Cooks (AFTRS, 1988).


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